

Dry farm project succeeds

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When Evan Maxfield, an American agronomist, and his team came a year ago to Kersa Illala Kebele in the Oromia Regional State about 245 km south of Addis Ababa and told the people that it was possible to grow crops during the dry season nobody believed them. And they said to the people, “Don’t believe our words but be patient and see what we will do”.

So, the people of Kersa Illala were patient and saw what the Americans did. And what the people saw they believed.

In the western United States where the farmers came from, there are wet and dry seasons. The minimum temperature in wet season is below zero degree centigrade. So they can only grow crops during the dry season. Over the last 100 years, they developed seeds that make use of moisture left over in the earth from the wet season.

Dry farming as a system of agriculture was developed in the Great Plains of the United States early in the 20th century. It depended on the efficient storage of the limited moisture in the soil and the selection of crops and growing methods that had made the best use of the moisture.

Dry farming is the cultivation of crops without irrigation in regions of limited moisture, typically less than 20 inches of precipitation annually.

Tilling the land shortly after harvest and keeping it free from weeds are typical methods. The ideal soil surface is free of weeds but has enough clods or dead vegetable matter to hinder runoff and prevent erosion.

Crops adapted to dry farming may be either drought-resistant or drought-evasive. Drought-resistant crops, such as sorghum, are able to reduce transpiration (emission of moisture) and may nearly cease growing during periods of moisture shortage, resuming growth when conditions again become favorable. Drought-evasive crops achieve their main growth during times of year when heat and drought conditions are not severe. Crops adapted to dry farming are usually smaller and quicker to mature than those grown under more humid conditions and are usually allotted more space.

Out of the seventeen varieties of crops experimented in the rift valley town of Kersa Illala fourteen were

successfully grown over eight hectares of land. Some of them are wheat, barley, safflower (an oilseed) sainfoin and three varieties of alfalfa as well as four varieties of grass for livestock and chickens.

Dry farming produces better food quality and more yield from the same hectare. And the grains developed for dry farming undergo no genetic modification.

“I look forward to the day when not just eight hectares but eight million hectares are farmed in the dry season in all of the rift valley,” Mr. Morrell, a member of the American team said last Saturday as he addressed the Kersa Illala community while they were celebrating the success of dry farming.

“Today we are making history in Ethiopia. This is the beginning of the end of famine in Ethiopia forever and the end of poverty that grinds the hopes and dreams of people,” Mr. Morrell said. Dry farming technology is a gift to Ethiopia from Village of Hope and Morrell.

The weeks after the end of the rainy season are the best time for sowing because there has to be more moisture to get the seed started. In the rift valley some of the wheat germinated before the rain. “Dry farming needs some rain, three or four rains are good enough,” Maxfield said.



Traditional farming needs continuous rain but dry farming needs only four rains between sowing and harvest. And only half as much plowing is done for dry farming as for traditional farming. “The more you turn the soil, the more you lose the moisture trapped in it.”

“Thirty years from now you can tell your fat little grandchildren that you remember this day. For your grandchildren it may be mundane, it won’t be as miraculous as it is for us today. But you shall tell your grandchildren about the day that it was a miracle, an agricultural revolution.”

Morrell said that the seeds developed for dry farming in America were not expensive, but it would be expensive to get them here.